Johnson

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A deep clear lake. That's all Johnson ever wanted to be. But it was hard to be that guy with his face planted on the sidewalk, hands wrenched up behind his back. It was early February, still the dead of winter in Iowa. His neck cramped as he arched away from the ground. A knot of onlookers gathered outside the conference center at Vult College, students and faculty lingering out of curiosity or support, who knew. A paunchy officer stood nearby, his radiomcrackling in its holster. The cement chilled his chest.

Johnson turned away from the crowd and lowered the other cheek to the ground, his face burning even in the cold. Claudia was expecting him at home any minute. He remembered howshe had bent over the quilt she was stitching from old cordu roy as he left, the way she often drew away from him when she was afraid. He hadn't meant to get arrested. It wasn't part of the plan.

The deputy loomed out of the dark, the street light gleaming on his shaved head. "On your feet, sir," he said, the way a sergeant might say shitbird. Johnson could smell the sour coffee on the officer's breath. It was snowing now, a mesmeric cascade from the night sky into the red and blue strobe flashing on the sidewalk. Johnson struggled up and walked to the squad car, his overcoat open, stocking cap askew. He lowered his head as he felt the deputy′s glove on his neck.

The door slammed shut, the warning lights clicked off, and the crowd began to disperse. One lingered, a tall man with the black beard of a coal miner. Dean Bradshaw stood with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his blue pea coat. Johnson could not read his expression in the shadows, but he met Bradshaw's gaze through the frosty window as the deputy fired the ignition and pulled away.

They had been friends once, before Bradshaw applied for dean, when he still taught botany and field biology. Bradshaw kept bees on a little acreage south of town, where he also tended a patch of restored prairie that he burned every spring and fall. He′d grown up in the Kentucky Appalachians, and his roots in the coal mines went back three generations, back to Harlan County.

Johnson was raised in a logging town in western Oregon where he saw college students chaining themselves to trees. They were just rich kids to him then. They couldn't see the families fed by the timber economy, the men in their forties, fifties, sixties – Johnson's uncles, and now his cousins – who saw no future for themselves without chainsaws, grapple loaders, and the lumber mill. All these years later, protests still seemed petty to Johnson, small outbursts of angst that missed the point. He and Bradshaw had often argued, but they agreed that the real battle was with the logging companies, not the sawyers, just as the quarrel over a war was never with the soldiers, but with the leaders who sent them.

The trouble started in September when an email from the dean's office announced a special event with Ed Rockland, an oil baron from North Dakota. Rockland was to visit Vult College to celebrate Entrepreneurship Week in February, accompanied by college alumna and Trustee, Sandra Simon. Simon had risen from slopping hogs in northern Iowa as a child to national acclaim as the anchor of Plymouth Rock, an evening news program that leaned right of center. She had the kind of face people trusted, soft at the edges and dimpled. Simon had featured Rockland's story in several segments on Plymouth Rock, chronicling his roots as the son of a Baptist minister and cotton farmer in Arkansas, where he learned the doggedness and faith that lifted his oil company from a single tanker truck, which he bought at age twenty, to a fifty billion-dollar powerhouse. "I aim to live to be a hunnerd," Rockland said in one interview, "And I mean to have a hunnerd billion by then." Rockland's visit was to culminate in a fireside chat with Simon, and all Vult faculty were encouraged to require their students to attend.

Johnson laughed aloud when he read the message. He was sitting on an exercise ball at his desk holding his breath and drawing his shoulders back until his spine cracked, and he couldn't help himself. Before long it will be Rockland College, he thought, and we will be required to hang a photograph of the Dear Leader in our offices. That sobered him up a bit. Vult College was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church but had come to be known for its environmental studies program, which Johnson chaired. He had led the campaign to fund the Martin Center, the first platinum-certified building in the state, featuring a green roof, solar panels, and cabinets made of recycled paper currency and banana peels. When the college leveled a rental property, Johnson lobbied to expand the college garden. He now supervised student volunteers that delivered three thousand pounds of produce to the cafeteria each year. Fundraising was underway to finance another first for Iowa: a kitchen classroom that produced more energy than it consumed. Johnson had met with architects to design it, and he worked the phone bank of donors most evenings.

Johnson had long dreamed of a place to break bread made of wheat grown on site. A crucible for folk arts like canning, cheese making, beekeeping. It would be a real step forward. But there was also a new engineering program in the works, and the thought of a Rockland Scholarship or a Rockland Laboratory was too real to laugh away.

It would be the death of environmental studies at Vult, that was sure. Whatever survived would then bow at the altar of engineering, which meant bowing at the altar of oil, and Johnson would be damned if came to that. He read the email again. The air in his office grew humid. Sweat broke in pinpricks of heat over his face.

It seemed like ages ago that Johnson had last driven out to Bradshaw's acreage to walk the field after a spring burn. Bradshaw's dog loped ahead of them, her head bent to the ground.Strange mounds rose all over the field, some sloped and rounded at the top, others like little plateaus. Johnson hadn't seen them in the tall grass the previous fall and wondered aloud what they were.

"Ant hills," Bradshaw said. "Nightmare if you want a smooth lawn, but a real friend to the prairie." He sawed his finger along the edge of the field, following the jagged line of mounds. "In a hundred years, these ants and prairie dogs and everything else that burrows will turn the prairie soil over two feet deep. And most of them dig deeper than that - ten, twelve feet - if they live underground."

Bradshaw never gave the same tour through his field. If it wasn't the ant mounds, it was a healthy patch of rattlesnake master with its round spiky blossoms, an herb once used to treat snake bite. Or the compass plant, known by arrow like leaves that were rumored to point north and south, whose taproot stretched as deep as sixteen feet. There was a steadiness in walking over ground where the roots sank well beyond the reach of fire and frost. Johnson always drove away from Bradshaw's place with a surge of courage.

The visits stopped when Bradshaw moved into the dean's office. There was a stiffness between them now, even though they had both come to Vult because they could see themselves in their first-generation students, the ones who weren't sure if they really belonged in the academy. Maybe Bradshaw found himself in a new limbo now, ill at ease in the boardroom but no longer a colleague in the same way, perhaps no longer a friend. Even so, Johnson couldn't believe Bradshaw was on board with Rockland's visit. They had to talk.

Bradshaw stiffened when Johnson stormed through his door unannounced.

"Look me in the eye, Brad, and tell me this is the kind of guy we want to celebrate on our campus." Johnson's blood pressure had risen considerably in the time it took to walk from his office to Vult Hall, where the administrators barracked. He could feel the sweat beading on his nose. "Do you have any idea how much damage this does to our reputation?"

Bradshaw leaned back in his chair, his hands flat on his desk. His mouth seemed to curl nastily, but Johnson saw that it was a nerve twitch.

"We are a learning institution." Bradshaw said. "We should be able to host a civil conversation with anyone."

"Are you honestly telling me that you would bring a cop from Ferguson to civilly talkabout criminal justice without representing the black community?" Johnson's pulse hammered in his ears. "We have to frame a conversation responsibly, don't you think?"

"This is Sandra's program. She and Mr. Rockland are our guests, and she is a Trustee of the college. It is not for us to demand that she follow a certain format."

Bradshaw made a pyramid with his hands and rested his chin on his fingers. There was a click in the wall as the register switched off. Johnson felt the silence crawling like a tick along his scalp.

"Well, Brad, I can't see how this interview will be of use to my students. We could all walk out of there with bad information. I can't be a part of it. I'm sorry."

Johnson left Bradshaw's office and walked down the limestone steps outside Vult Hall. The flag rattled on its pole, snapping in a southern wind. The sun baked his face, though it was late afternoon, and his shirt clung to his flesh as he walked back to his office. He would boycott the Rockland interview. That was all. Stay home with Claudia and Hector and let it blow over.

He had been teaching at Vult College for nearly thirty years, and he had come to think of it as sacred space. The university was one of the few places left in American life where scholarship still occupied the center of discourse. Not journalism, where clickbait brought even mainstream papers to the level of tabloids. Not churches, where sermons were so riddled with sitcom quotes that scripture seemed to be a metaphor for popular culture. If Sandra Simon brought Ed Rockland to campus for a television spectacle, even the classroom would have no more dignity than an athletic arena festooned with corporate advertisements.

To hell with Rockland. He could just stay home. But no one would notice a boycott. It would concede power absolutely. Maybe a petition to block the event? But Bradshaw had his orders and since Simon was a Trustee, no one outranked her, so there was no process left to follow.

A protest. That was all Johnson could imagine. He remembered the hippie kids in Oregon pissing their pants during their long vigils, singing and praying as they stood handcuffed to one another around the trunk of a Douglas Fir. It seemed so degrading, like a child kicking and wailing on the floor. But wasn't it worse to let Rockland have his way with the college?

Johnson knew he probably had oil bonds in his retirement portfolio. Half the products on his desk were oil products. The plastic phone. The computer screen. The ballpoint pens. The varnish coating the desktop. But colonial Americans didn't need to burn all of the brooms, benches, or butter churns they had imported from London to feel justified in rising up against King George. Abolitionists fought against slavery precisely because they could not accept clothing manufactured by other people's blood as a fact of life. In fact, it was the pervasiveness of Rockland's influence that compelled Johnson to act. He couldn't salve a hemorrhoid, for Christ's sake, without feeling like Rockland's fingers were into everything.

He brought it up over dinner with Claudia that night. Hector left the table after powering through his mashed potatoes, and lay on the loveseat in the den, the sharp angles in his cheeks lit up by his phone. Johnson could see only his son's socks and bristles of black hair above the screen.

Johnson turned back to Claudia. "Honey," he said. "I have to do something. I just can't ignore this guy."

Claudia eyed him over her wine glass. "What about free speech?"

"It's not free speech if only one side gets to talk."

"But you could talk about it in class, right?"

Johnson reddened. "That's exactly the point. Rockland owns the media and he's going to spend a billion or more on the next election. He doesn't get to rig my classroom, too."

Claudia raised her eyebrows at that and stood to clear her plate. Her hair fell into her eyes, curly and streaked with gray, and Johnson felt a pang of tenderness even as he seethed. He had lost her at politics. But how could she not care? Her resignation was exactly what gave Rockland such power. Johnson glanced toward his son. Hector′s screen showed a steady rain of jelly beans, lemon drops, and peppermints, which he rearranged with his thumbs until he matched three of a kind. Then the screen flashed and a diamond appeared. Johnson wondered what was in his son's head just then. No words, certainly. Maybe an unconscious algorithm. Pattern recognition. Spatial orientation. It was like rewinding evolution, inhabiting the mind of a rodent or a snake. A way of vanishing.

Claudia settled into the easy chair by the fireplace and bent over her quilting hoop, as unavailable in her own way as their son. Johnson carried his dishes to the sink. He looked into the backyard through the kitchen window, gazing at the sugar maple in the yard, now lit by the late day sun. The tree was native to Canada, where it often grew in pure stands. Bradshaw had told Johnson once that maples could communicate with each other through their roots, rationing water and nutrients in hard times. Johnson wondered if his sugar maple shared water or stole from the red oak next door. Could a maple and spruce work together to survive? Maybe he was searching too hard for a metaphor.

He wished for a moment that it were spring. Ever since Hector could walk, they had tapped the maple when the nights saw a light frost and the days warmed to a thaw. This year they would do it again, stoking a wood fire in the yard and boiling buckets of sap down to syrup. They only finished a few pints each year, but the tradition was as important to Johnson as his own birthday. He hoped someday, maybe when Hector bought his first home, the spring ritual would become his own, a memory that could anchor him to a new place.

The semester marched on, and soon it was Thanksgiving. It was balmy for November, nearly sixty degrees and sunny. That weekend Johnson took Hector to the farm where they always bought their Christmas tree. The entrance was locked, and a sign hung from the gate that said "Out of business." Johnson knew the farmers, Don and Bev, and still had their number in his phone.

Don apologized and said Johnson and Hector were welcome to walk the grounds and take a tree if they found one. "Just send me twenty dollars if you get lucky," Don said. "But it's slim picking out there. Too much rain or not enough, and the beetles are killing everything else."

The trees were scrawny and ragged. Johnson preferred fir for their soft needles and scent, but they had all turned orange. Hector found a spruce at the edge of the property, where a stand of oaks might have shaded it during the summer. Johnson gave him the hand saw and watched him go to work. Hector wasn't a thoughtless boy, but he had his mother's frankness, which Johnson often found cold, and a brutal rationality that Johnson recalled in his own father. He watched Hector give himself wholly to his task, eyes fixed on the saw, arms pumping like levers. Don′s and Bev's farm had been here as long as Johnson had taught at Vult, as long as Hector had been alive. The farm was always filled with children shouting as they searched for the perfect tree. This year the empty grove felt more like Halloween than Christmas.

Johnson half wanted to leave the spruce where it was, but Hector's jeans were flecked with sawdust and sap. The kerf widened behind the blade, the treetop shivered, and the spruce rolled away from the stump. Hector gripped the top, Johnson took the trunk, together they dragged it to the car. As Johnson lashed it to the roof, his face was damp with sweat. Hector sat in the front seat, his head bent over his phone. Did the boy care that there might be no tree next year? Maybe he cared a great deal, but vanished into his screen the way a widower might seek oblivion through drink. Johnson drove home with the window down, his arm outstretched to catch the breeze. He wondered if Hector feared the future, if in his private moments he felt alone, unable to speak of it to his father, who would be dead before the earth went to hell. Perhaps his son felt bitter that this was the world he'd been given. Whether there was a Christmas tree or whether they made their own syrup from the backyard might have been the least of his concerns.

Bradshaw sent another email after the holidays about the Rockland visit. "Please join our very own Sandra Simon and Mr. Rockland in a few short weeks for 'An Evening with Ed Rockland,'" it said. "The interview will air on national television as a special edition of Plymouth Rock. This is an extraordinary chance for Vult College to promote its new engineering program." Johnson felt the flames rise in his thoughts again. Branding. Publicity. Students would come to see a celebrity, maybe get their own five seconds on camera. Environmental studies was as irrelevant as an ex-boyfriend at a baby shower.

Johnson straightened on his exercise ball, drew his shoulders back, and felt his spine crack. He opened a new document on his computer and began typing. "The New York Department of Health recently deemed fracking a serious enough threat to the public that the state has banned further development." He described how oil boomtowns degrade rural communities through human trafficking, drug violence, and overwhelmed hospitals and schools. Why an event that excluded audience participation could only enable the relentless disinformation campaigns about climate change that contaminate media and politics. A peaceful protest, he concluded, was the only real learning opportunity for students.

The bile had subsided by the time he finished writing. Johnson printed copies and took them door to door around campus like a campaign volunteer. Sam Bennett, the young biologist who studied lizards, blushed when Johnson found him during office hours. Jill Rhoades in Chemistry, Eric Ritz in Religion, even Maggie Green, the athletic training director who dug recyclable bottles out of the trash at football games - they all agreed with Johnson. But a protest? Was it fair to his students who might be required to attend for another class? It was, Johnson said. If it were a Klan member being interviewed by a sympathetic host with no counterpart on stage, he hoped to Christ they would object. When Eric Ritz asked if that was a fair analogy, Johnson blurted, "Civility can't balance a conversation that dignifies evil." Ritz crinkled his brow. So this was really about good and evil? Leave it to Ritz to plumb the depths of his ethical well. Johnson had not used those words in his statement. But perhaps that was it, at bottom. It was a question of good and evil.

It was bitterly cold the day Rockland arrived on campus. The temperature dropped to zero overnight and remained in single digits through the afternoon. Johnson taught his first class in the science building, where he preferred the new projectors for showing films. It had once been a run-of-the mill facility until a donor proposed a renovation that raised the code to gold efficiency standards. More windows for natural lighting, a vestibule with a second door inside each entrance to minimize heat loss. Johnson's favorite feature was a sun-activated fountain near the front entrance. On cloudy days the fountain lay dry or wept into the drain, but by midafternoon on a clear day, jets of water surged nearly fifteen feet from the ground.

Johnson shouldered his way through the vestibule after class, cinching a scarf around his neck before stepping into the cold. The campus lay buried in snow. A field of ice crystals swept down the long slope away from the science building, each shard translucent up close, but blinding as a whole. Johnson hunched past the library, sliding carefully over frozen patches on the sidewalk. He glanced up in time to avoid colliding with an enormous figure in a black coat, the head of a phalanx of people surrounding the man himself, Ed Rockland. Johnson stood still for a moment, and the crowd flowed around him. Rockland was bare-headed and cheerful, his bald pate and cheeks reddening in the open air. He nodded and winked when he drew abreast of Johnson, then the group moved on, closing up like a bacterium that had swallowed and excreted a food particle. Johnson watched them go, at least four bodyguards and three other suits disappearing into the building.

His feet were numb by the time he reached his office, where he had stashed a white piece of poster board. The bodyguards had him worried. They couldn't arrest a professor for a peaceful protest on his own campus, could they? But security could escort him out of the building. He was prepared for that. Let them do their worst.

Johnson stenciled the name of Rockland's company across the top of his poster. Blue Shale, Incorporated. He added a few statistics below: Most oil spilled per gallon, Most fines for violations, Most sterilized farmland. He drew a question across the bottom half: Entrepreneurship or Exploitation?

It would be a protest of one. Johnson had been unable to recruit other faculty, and he felt he could not ask his own students to participate. He left copies of his statement in the Student Center, near the lounge outside the coffee shop. But he knew that most of the young people at Vult were conservative. They came from families that taught such respect for authority that he could scarcely get them to argue with him in class. More than half participated in a team sport and would have faced punishment for a conduct violation. And why should they risk their futures to stand with him? Johnson couldn't blame them. At their age he would have thought a protest meaningless, too.

Johnson taught his afternoon class and walked home to make dinner. He tossed vegetables in a stir fry, a pot of brown rice cooling on a kitchen towel. Claudia poured herself some wine, and they sat down together. Johnson sprinkled peanuts over his food. Hector doused his with hot sauce. They ate in silence, eyes averted. Claudia caught his eye as she raised her glass, and Johnson saw the worry in her face. Hector finished, rinsed his plate, and sank into the couch with his phone. Johnson looked into the backyard as he loaded the dishwasher. A stiff wind blew out of the north. Dried coneflower stalks rattled against the fence. A half-moon glowed behind the bare branches of the sugar maple like a heart within the ribs of the tree. The thought gave Johnson pleasure, though he knew this was his own way of vanishing. Rockland, Bradshaw, even his wife and son would leave him to his metaphors so long as he didn't try to make them real.

Johnson dried his hands on a kitchen towel, his knuckles scaly from the cold. The dishwasher hummed. He ruffled Hector's hair and kissed the top of Claudia's head as she sat quilting by the gas fireplace. "See you in a few hours," he said. They murmured a reply, and then he was out on the sidewalk striding toward campus, the wind raising gooseflesh along the back of his neck.

Johnson stopped by his office to gather his poster and walked to the conference center to find the doors locked. Darkness had fallen, and light blazed from inside the building. A velvet rope ran from the foyer to the opposite wall, blocking most of the lobby. He could make out two men, tall, black coats, the bodyguards he met that morning. They were huddled with Greg, the fat security guard who puttered around campus on a golf cart.

Johnson caught Greg's eye and waved to the door. Greg turned back to the huddle. So they want to freeze me out, Johnson thought. While he waited, shoulders hunched against the wind, he wondered what it would take to arrest a protester. He wasn't trespassing. The event was open to the public. He did not intend to block anyone from attending. They would have to be looking for a reason.

Johnson bounced on the balls of his feet, sinking into his collar. A few students, dressed in black, emerged from a back entrance to the lobby and set up a table with programs. Bradshaw stood at the far end of the room talking to the bodyguards. He signaled something to the students, and a thin girl whose face looked ghostly against her black shirt approached the doors. The lock clicked, the doors opened, and then Johnson was inside. Heat warmed his cheeks as the smell of carpet cleaner washed over him.

Johnson followed the rope line to the wall, where he stood with his poster. Bradshaw appeared at his elbow, gesturing toward the banquet hall.

"We thought you could set up in there," he said. "We don't want to clog the entrance."

"I'm fine here," Johnson said. "I'm not blocking anyone."

"We'd just ask that you go into the banquet hall where there's more room."

"What if I don't?" Johnson said.

Bradshaw flushed. "Please just go on in."

Johnson could feel the tickle of anger in the back of his thoughts. He fought it back and stared past Bradshaw at the line forming at the door. Bradshaw fidgeted and then melted away.

Students and faculty streamed into the banquet hall. Jill Rhoades and Maggie Green walked in together, flashing embarrassed smiles before hurrying to their seats. Johnson stood quietly behind his poster. One young man leaned in to read it, but most would not meet his gaze. The clock ticked toward 7:30, and then it was time. Johnson slipped into the hall and found a seat in the back row before the lights dimmed and Bradshaw took the stage.

Bradshaw spoke about hard work and humble beginnings, how he and Sandra and Ed had all grown up in rural America, how they wanted to encourage students who shared those values to aim high. This was a night to celebrate entrepreneurship, he said, a night to honor a man who came from nothing, chased a dream, and stuck with it until it came true.

Bradshaw sat down, and a light flickered over the screen on the stage. Music swelled, soft guitar rock, and the logo for Blue Shale appeared, the words in enormous letters with cracks running through them. It was a biopic produced by the company, photos with a voiceover. Little Ed with his toy dump truck, a cowlicked boy in a baseball uniform, then a young man standing in front of his first tanker truck, arms folded so the flesh of his forearms appeared chiseled and veined. Then he was Ed Rockland sitting at the head of a boardroom table in suit and tie, chin resting on his clasped hands, a gold bracelet dangling from one wrist. The film ended with Rockland cutting a ribbon to celebrate his endowed engineering program at North Dakota State University, then Rockland in a cap and gown receiving an honorary doctorate in Arkansas.

The credits rolled, the projector dimmed, and Simon and Rockland took their seats. The stage was set with two overstuffed chairs, a blue area rug with the Vult College seal woven into the middle, and an end table with a lamp. Simon began by thanking Bradshaw and the whole Vult College family. It was good to be home, she said. She had just come from a show in California - truly the land of fruits and nuts - and she was glad to be back in Iowa where she belonged.

Laughter ran through the crowd. Listening to Simon, Johnson thought, was like eating creamy potato casserole. Nothing new, no surprises, but just enough cheese to hit the pleasure zones.

Simon retraced the biopic with Rockland for several minutes: what it was like for him to grow up picking cotton by hand, how his father - a lay minister - had shaped his character as a young man.

Simon smiled, her cheeks dimpling. "And what do you say to environmental critics of fracking?"

"Totally safe, totally safe," Rockland said. He leaned forward in his chair. "We drill so far down - seven, eight thousand feet - the brine ain't gonna reach groundwater. Most spills, you know, are on top ah our tanks and never even touch ground. I ain't actually spilled a drop in North Dakota."

Johnson knew this was not true. One of Blue Shale's spills had flooded ten acres on a North Dakota farm, land which would never be fertile again in his lifetime. He looked around. No one was going to challenge him on this? Simon didn't appear to be, and everyone else seemed as mesmerized by the cameras as Hector was by his phone. Goddamn it, he thought. This is a college campus. He stood.

Simon saw him and hesitated, then turned back to Rockland as if to continue.

"Excuse me," Johnson said. The room turned, maybe four, five hundred people. "Excuse me, but that is just not true."

Johnson could see Bradshaw looking past him, toward the rear of the room, where the bodyguards must be lurking. He raised his voice and looked directly at Rockland. "Your company caused the largest inland spill in American history. See the Associated Press, the New York Times – photos of it are all over the web." Johnson sat down. The cameras turned back to the front. OK, seriously, he told himself. Point made. Calm down.

Rockland laughed and patted Simon on the arm. "I get this all the time. Those photos ain't real. That's just Russian propaganda, trying to weaken U.S. oil and gas. And, believe me, I don't read the *New York Times*."

Johnson knew the farmers had settled with Blue Shale and now had a gag order that prevented them from speaking publicly. Which left Rockland free to spin public relations as he liked. Still, he couldn't believe how brazenly the man lied.

"Russian propaganda?" Simon looked nervous. "Well, you know what Reagan always said, 'Trust but verify.'" Only Reagan said that about the Russians, Johnson thought, not American businessmen. Rockland smiled and shrugged and the room relaxed.

The interview turned back to Blue Shale, how it had grown to a global force, how Rockland was now devoted to philanthropy. But why was he so interested in colleges?

"You know, I never went to college," he said. "I just went to work. Course, now the oil rigs I got aren't your granddaddy's oil rigs, so I need engineers who know how to run em. We got more oil than Saudi Arabia, so we got no shortage of work."

Simon asked what an engineer might earn at the company, and the figure was six times Johnson's salary. This was the drift he had feared. The job creator as the patron of the college, the college degree as the path to the job, the professor as the drudge, the hired help. But even then he could have stood it, clenched his toes and made it to the end.

"So we just saw you in a cap and gown," Simon was saying. "Should we call you Dr. Rockland?"

"Yeah - hey, I like that. Maybe I'll innerduce myself that way next time I testify before Congress. Doc-tor Rockland."

Johnson boiled in his seat. Should he just leave? He was taking it too personally. But Simon was a Trustee. She should know better than to punk her faculty like that. Fuck it, he thought. What else is tenure good for, if not for this? He felt himself standing again.

"Excuse me." The room turned again, and Johnson heard murmurs. What is he doing? Jesus, sit down.

Simon made a motion to Bradshaw, and Johnson knew his time was short.

"At Vult College, we teach our students that a degree means something," he said. "You, sir, are no doctor. We believe –"

Johnson felt a stab of pain as his arms were wrenched behind his back. The police? Rockland's goons? He couldn't tell as he was hustled up the side aisle and out the front entrance. He felt himself falling and turned his face to keep from mashing his nose on the cement.

At the station Johnson gave his fingerprints. He was made to strip, to turn and squat and cough, then to turn again and lift himself to prove he was concealing nothing. His clothes were taken and he was given an orange uniform with no underclothes and orange flip-flops. Then he was photographed and led to a solitary holding cell, where he would wait until offered his phone call. He would call Claudia. She would come down, eyes puffy from crying, and he would be released with orders to appear in court on charges of disorderly conduct the following day. But the college would decline to press charges, and the uproar would be edited out of the Plymouth Rock broadcast. A few days later it was as if it had never happened.

Had he accomplished anything? Johnson could not say. Some of his colleagues now regarded him as warily as they might an unleashed dog. Bradshaw would scarcely look him in the eye when they passed. But there was no press release about a Rockland Scholarship, no rumors of a donation at all. Johnson went back to his phone banking.

February turned to March. When the thaw came one morning, Johnson took Hector into the yard and screwed two buckets to the sugar maple. They shivered in the wind as they waited for the sap trickle down the spile and into the pail. The ground was loosening, the smell of humus lifting on the breeze. In time the earth would turn spongy and yield to the shovel, then the seeds. Johnson rested his hand on Hector's shoulder. The sap welled up in the groove, a bead forming on the lip of the spile. The first drip echoed in the pail. Another. And then the steady drumbeat of spring.